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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000632

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
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PARIS FOR RWALLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/07/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SECRETARY LAHOOD CONGRATULATES SLEIMAN ON
ELECTIONS

REF: A. BEIRUT 629

[B](#). BEIRUT 630

[C](#). BEIRUT 631

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In a June 7 election day meeting with Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, President Michel Sleiman was pleased to see elections taking place peacefully in one day. He predicted the difference between majority and opposition would be only two or three seats, and said the close elections showed the strength of Lebanese democracy. He assessed that his biggest challenge as president had been to represent all the Lebanese people and to get them to accept his decisions. He believed tensions would ease following the elections, hopefully paving the way for electoral reforms, including the creation of a Senate and a proportional representation system. Sleiman was positive about President Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo, saying he was impressed with the President's commitment to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. End summary.

ELECTIONS IN ONE DAY:

"THEY SAID WE COULDN'T DO IT"

[1](#)2. (SBU) Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, Kathleen LaHood, the Ambassador, LaHood Chief of Staff Joan DeBoer, INLOff, and EconOff called on President Sleiman at Baabda Palace at 5 pm on election day, June 7, two hours before the polls closed. Secretary LaHood arrived after observing voting in ten polling stations in Jbeil, Metn, Beirut, Aley, and Baabda districts. LaHood praised the smooth execution of the elections and noted that turnout appeared high. He explained that he had come to express U.S. support for Lebanon's elections and to pass the message that it was important for the Lebanese to vote. Sleiman estimated overall turnout would be at least 45-50%, and that some polling stations might have to extend voting hours beyond the official 7 pm closing, because of crowds. He was pleased the elections were taking place in one day (as opposed to the previous four-day scenario) and praised Interior Minister

Ziad Baroud for organizing the process. Secretary LaHood reiterated his praise for the electoral process, and noted that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) were doing an excellent job of maintaining order.

¶13. (SBU) Sleiman believed the election would be close, with only a few seats separating the majority and minority. He made no predictions about the results, but said the closeness of the electoral battle was a testament to the strength of Lebanese democracy. Once results are in, he anticipated the process of forming a government would take time. (Note: As of 3 pm on June 8, it appeared the March 14 alliance had won 71 seats to March 8's 57. End note.)

EASIER TO BE PRESIDENT THAN GENERAL

¶14. (C) Secretary LaHood asked Sleiman what his greatest challenges have been as president. Sleiman answered without hesitation, "To represent all the Lebanese and have them accept my decisions." He recounted how both sides of the political spectrum had criticized him in his first year: March 14 for his attendance of the Arab League summit in Doha and his trips to Iran and Syria, and the opposition for his meeting with President Bush and his attendance of the Interfaith Dialogue in New York sponsored by Saudi King Abdallah. Fortunately, with each controversial move, in the end all parties accepted his decisions, he said.

¶15. (C) In response to a question from the Secretary, Sleiman said that although Lebanese politicians are difficult to work

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with, the presidency was still an easier job than his previous position as commander of the LAF. He recalled each decision he made to send soldiers into harm's way -- from dealing with instances of sectarian street conflict to rooting out extremists in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp -- and assessed that that responsibility was heavier than any he had taken on in the political realm in the past year. Nonetheless, he joked that at least soldiers followed orders, unlike Lebanon's unruly political class.

POST-ELECTION AGENDA:
REFORM

¶16. (C) Although Sleiman expected the process of government formation after the elections to be difficult and potentially long, he anticipated that tensions would decline afterwards. He thought this would offer an opportunity to reform the judicial system and the electoral law, moving toward a system of proportional representation, and potentially creating a second parliamentary chamber. Sleiman envisioned a Senate where each confessional community could elect its representatives, while all Lebanese would vote for representatives of all confessions in the lower chamber. Nonetheless, he did not necessarily think the existence of a Senate should mean elimination of the 50-50 Muslim-Christian quota in parliament. "We have a national understanding," he said. "We are a country of both Christians and Muslims, and it is important to preserve that."

MIDDLE EAST PEACE
IMPORTANT FOR LEBANON

¶17. (C) Sleiman believed President Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo was a good step forward, and he was particularly keen on the President's stated commitment to Israeli-Palestinian peace, a topic of particular concern to Lebanon, with its large population of Palestinian refugees. Secretary LaHood stressed that Lebanon should be part of the process of comprehensive Middle East peace. Sleiman said he looked forward to working with Special Envoy George Mitchell.

18. (U) Secretary LaHood has cleared this cable.
SISON